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ESTABLISH A NATIONAL MILITARY PARK AT FORT STEVENS

FEBRUARY 20, 1925.—Committed to the Committee of the Whole House on the state of the Union and ordered to be printed

Mr. WAINWRIGHT, from the Committee on Military Affairs, submitted the following

REPORT

[To accompany H. R. 11365]

The Committee on Military Affairs having under consideration bill (H. R. 11365) to establish a national military park at Fort Stevens, in the District of Columbia, and to authorize the acquisition of such lands as may be necessary to preserve said fort, having considered the same, report thereon with the recommendation that it do pass with the following amendment:

Strike out all after the enacting clause and insert the following in lieu thereof:

That in order to suitably preserve that part of Fort Stevens, in the District of Columbia, which lies west of the first street west of Georgia Avenue in the city of Washington in said District, and the monument erected by the Association of the Survivors of the Sixth Union Army Corps at the point where President Abraham Lincoln was under fire in the battle which occurred in front of said fort, in the Civil War, all of the grounds and earthworks of said fort now existing and such other grounds as may be necessary to properly preserve the same are hereby declared to be a historic landmark and the Secretary of War be, and is hereby, authorized and directed to acquire by purchase when the prices are deemed reasonable by him, otherwise by condemnation under the procedure prescribed by the laws within said District in such cases, all of said fort and such other lands as are deemed necessary by him for roads and the suitable preservation of said fort and monument to the end that it may be declared to be a national monument by the President of the United States as provided by the act of June 8, 1906.

SEC. 2. To enable the Secretary of War to carry out the provisions of this act, including the condemnation, purchase of the necessary lands, surveys, maps, marking boundaries, opening, constructing, or repairing necessary roads and streets, salaries for labor and services, traveling expenses, supplies and materials, the sum of $25,000 or so much thereof as may be necessary, is hereby authorized to be appropriated out of the moneys in the Treasury not otherwise appropriated, to remain available until expended, and the disbursements under this act shall be reported by the Secretary of War to the Congress.

Amend the title to said bill to read as follows:

To acquire Fort Stevens, in the District of Columbia, and such other land as may be necessary to preserve said fort as a historic landmark.

Fort Stevens is located in the northern part of the District of Columbia and lies west of the first street west of Georgia Avenue in the city of Washington. It was one of the forts erected early in the Civil War for the defense of the city and guarded the Seventh Street Road entrance into the city. General Early appeared before this fort on July 11, 1864, with an army of nearly 20,000. There was some fighting in the afternoon and on the 12th Bidwell's brigade marched out and drove the Confederates from their position. President Lincoln stood on the works of this fort, under fire, while both battles were going on, apparently unconscious of the danger, watching with grave and passive countenance the progress of the battle, amidst the whizzing of bullets of the sharpshooters until an officer fell mortally wounded within 3 feet of him. It is the only instance where a President of the United States was under fire in a battle. In our opinion this fact alone makes the place where he stood of great historic value, and places it in a class of its own. Part of those who fell in the engagement now rest in the National Cemetery, but a short distance to the north, on the east side of the avenue. While not a large battle, yet it had more than ordinary significance and historic value because it was the only military attack on the city of Washington in the Civil War, and occurred in the District of Columbia, and within sight of the Dome of the Capitol. On July 12, 1920, the Association of the Survivors of the Sixth Army Corps, which took part in the engagements, erected a monument on the spot where President Lincoln stood. That part of the fort is still well preserved and is not owned by the United States. It and considerable land surrounding it are still vacant, but city improvements are leading in that direction and are very near to it. It is our opinion that this fort and sufficient land surrounding it, should be acquired by the United States before the fort is destroyed and obliterated; that it should be declared as a historic landmark and also declared to be a national monument, by the President of the United States as provided by the act of June 8, 1906. The history of this engagement and the other incidents in connection therewith are given as follows:

[From Nicolay C. Hay, "Life of Lincoln," Vol. 9, pp. 169 to 173.]

General Early left his camp near Rockville at dawn on the 11th and pushed forward with eager hopes on Washington. The Infantry, turning to the left, advanced by the Seventh Street Road, which runs by Silver Spring into the city, with a cloud of cavalry on either flank. The day was hot and dusty, and the troops suffered greatly, but, inspired by the prospect of the rich prize before them, they plodded onward with good heart, and shortly after noon Early, riding a little in advance of his column, came in sight of Fort Stevens, which guarded the entrance to Washington by Seventh Street. A brief survey convinced him "that the works were but feebly manned"; the greatest achievement of the war seemed to be within his grasp. He ordered General Rodes to "bring his division into line as rapidly as possible and to move into the works if he could." But before the column, which was moving by flank, could be brought up Early, who was gazing intently at the line of works in his front, saw to his infinite vexation a column of men in blue file into them on the right and left; a fringe of skirmishers was thrown out in front, and from all the batteries in range a sharp artillery fire opened. His hopes of a surprise passed away in the wreathing smoke of the national guns, and he gave orders for a close reconnaissance of the position.

The whole afternoon was consumed in this work, and as it proceeded the prospect for the Confederates became every hour more discouraging. * * * "Inclosed forts for heavy artillery with a tier of lower works in front of each, pierced for an immense number of guns, the whole being connected by curtains, with ditches in front, and strengthened by palisades and abatis. * * * Every possible approach was raked with artillery." In vain did he seek a point of entry on either side. As far as his eye could reach to the left over the bare spaces where the forests had been leveled to give play to the guns, the same powerful works; and his cavalry coming in from the right reported the fortifications on the Georgetown Pike to be still more impregnable. Early might well be excused for declining to rush his tired army upon these bristling works; he had less than 20,000 men—he says "about 8,000 muskets," * * * and he was laboring under a serious error in regard to the troops in front of him. He had captured some of the Sixth Corps at the Monocacy; the newspapers had informed him of the departure of heavy reinforcements from Petersburg; and when he saw the improvised levies of General Augur filing into the works in the afternoon, he came, not unnaturally, to the conclusion that he had to deal with the veterans of the Army of the Potomac. This supposed state of affairs called for the most careful preparation, and before the preparations were completed what he had imagined had become true; Wright, with his two magnificent divisions, had landed at the wharf, being received by President Lincoln in person amid a tumult of joyous cheering; and the advance of the Nineteenth Corps under W. H. Emory was also in the streets of Washington. When the rear of Early's infantry closed up in the evening, the Capital was already safe from a coup de main.

It was with much diminution of his high spirits of the morning that Early called his generals together for consultation on the night of the 11th. There was clearly no time to be lost. Washington must be assaulted immediately if at all. The passes of South Mountain would soon be closed, he said—not knowing that Julian Stahel's troopers had already occupied them. But it was like parting soul and body for Early to give up his hope of seizing Washington, and he broke up the conference, saying he would assault the works at daybreak next morning, unless it should previously be shown to be impracticable. In the night he received false information from Bradley T. Johnson that two corps of the Army of the Potomac had arrived. He therefore delayed his attack until he could make one final reconnaissance; he rode to the front, and found the parapets lined with troops. With the dome of the Capitol in his sight, gilded by the rays of the rising sun, he gave up all hope of capturing Washington. He knew, however, that it would be most unwise to turn and run by daylight in the face of such an enemy, and he therefore determined to maintain a bold front until nightfall, and then make good his retreat.

The evening before, Wright had proposed to send out a brigade to clear away the enemy's skirmish line, but this was not thought advisable by General Augur until the Union lines were better established. At night the Sixth Corps relieved the pickets and intrenched their line. On the morning of the 12th, skirmishing began and continued all the morning, and in the afternoon Daniel D. Bidwell's brigade of Getty's division was sent out by Wright to drive the Confederate skirmishers from a house and orchard near the Silver Spring Road. Rode's division, which was in possession of the place, stood its ground handsomely, and a severe engagement ensued, which has a special interest from the fact that it was fought in full view of the Capitol, and was witnessed by the President of the United States on one side and on the other by General Breckenridge, the candidate who had received the suffrages of the seceding States in 1860.

The President had resolutely refrained from giving military orders during the invasion—though sorely tempted to do so, on account of the disinclination of Grant and Halleck to interfere with each other's authority—but his interest in the progress of affairs was intense and ardent, and his presence among the soldiers aroused the greatest enthusiasm. When Rode's division arrived on the afternoon of the 11th he saw the first shots exchanged in front of Fort Stevens, and stood in the fort, his tall figure making him a conspicuous mark, until ordered to withdraw; and on the 12th, when Bidwell's brigade marched, in perfect order, out of the works, to drive the enemy from the Rives house, the President again stood, apparently unconscious of danger, watching with that grave and passive countenance, the progress of the fight amid the whizzing bullets of the sharpshooters, until an officer fell mortally wounded within 3 feet of him, and General Wright peremptorily represented to him the needless risk he was running. The national troops marched out with disciplined valor, worthy of the place and the spectators; they advanced in unbroken formation up the slight acclivity in the afce of a destructive fire, drove the Confederates from the orchard and the grove

which sheltered them, and pushed the enemy's pickets back for a mile. The success was gained not without loss; two hundred and eighty of the small force engaged were killed and wounded.

A letter of the Secretary of War on the question is as follows:

FEBRUARY 11, 1925.

The Hon. SAMUEL E. COOK,
House of Representatives, Washington, D. C.

DEAR MR. COOK: In your letter of February 7, 1925, you request that I reconsider my report to the chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs on H. R. 11365, a bill which would provide for the creation of a national military park on the battle field at Fort Stevens. While I am unable to comply fully with your request, I am glad to have this opportunity to set forth at somewhat greater length the considerations on which I based my report.

In my opinion the purpose and nature of a national military park are properly indicated in the first paragraph of the act of August 19, 1890, for the establishment of the Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park, from which I here quote:

"* * * for the purpose of preserving and suitably marking for historical and professional military study the fields of some of the most remarkable maneuvers and most brilliant fighting in the War of the Rebellion."

I feel that a national military park should be a piece of ground of considerable extent, the site of an important military engagement in which a comparatively large number of troops were involved, the outcome of which had a definite military and political effect. This site should be marked in such a way as not only to commemorate the event, the troops and individuals engaged, but also to preserve for historical purposes and tactical and strategical studies by military personnel the disposition of units and general plan of campaign of the battle. A consideration of the above will immediately reveal to you how far the battle field at Fort Stevens falls short of the requirements I deem necessary to justify the creation of a national military park. The fact that President Lincoln was there present during the battle, this being the only instance where a President of the United States has been under fire in a battle, is historically important and interesting, but I do not feel that it is sufficiently so to make this battle field suitable for the development you recommend. The other circumstance you mention, that this was the only military attack on the city of Washington in the Civil War, appears to me also to be of importance in a sense other than that required for this purpose.

As to your remarks on the act of June 8, 1906, I do not find myself in agreement with your view that Fort Stevens would not come within its scope. Fort Stevens might well be termed a historic landmark, and a means is provided in that act whereby the United States may obtain title to any desired tract which may be held in private ownership. In this connection you are no doubt aware of the fact that several forts, notably Fort Pulaski, Ga., and Fort Wood, N. Y., have been declared national monuments under this act. More recently the site of the grave of Meriwether Lewis has been relinquished to the United States, accepted by the Secretary of the Interior, and is now in process of being declared a national monument by presidential proclamation. If the Congress so desires, it can undoubtedly appropriate money for the purchase of the land at Fort Stevens, and when title is secured it would be immediately possible to have Fort Stevens declared a national monument. Indeed, I may go so far as to say that were such a bill referred to me for report I would be glad to give it a favorable recommendation.

I am myself extremely interested in the battle fields of America, and have taken every opportunity to visit and to study them and there are many of them which should, in my opinion, be preserved and marked, but I should like to have this done in a systematic way with a view both to economy and logical selection. I have heretofore expressed to Congress the opinion that no more national military parks should be established, and no more battle fields marked until after a study of the whole subject had been made and a program developed. However, I have not yet reached a conclusion as to what form this study should take.

I hope that the above remarks have made by attitude clear to you, and I regret that I am unable to consider Fort Stevens in the light you desire.

Sincerely yours,

JOHN W. WEEKS,
Secretary of War.

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